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Will The Importance Of Religion Change?

Survey research is a newborn babe when compared to an institution such as religion which is fundamental to human nature and can be dated back to the dawn of recorded history. This disparity can be an enormous handicap to the religion researcher who usually must be content to compare data from decade to decade or even year to year when comparisons by generations and centuries are needed.

Viewing only current data concerning a basic measurement such as the importance of religion to one's self could suggest there is a constant proportion of the American public who consider religion to be very important. Throughout the 1980s, approximately 55% of the adult population saw religion as very important in their lives, 30% said it was fairly important, 14% believed it was not very important, and 1% held no opinion. Over this 10-year span, opinion on the subject never varied by more than a statistically non-significant percentage point or two. Final measurements for the decade taken by The Gallup Organization in 1989 were an exact parallel of the findings for the entire 10-year period.

Three earlier surveys, however, could suggest that far from being a constant phenomenon, the sense of the importance of religion may be a matter that fluctuates widely through the ages. A survey taken by The Gallup Organization in 1978 showed a lower proportion of the population (52%) enthusiastic about religion, while by contrast earlier surveys showed very high levels of religious importance in 1965 (70%) and 1952 (75%). In the absence of survey data we can only speculate about how low the sense of importance of religion in America may have dropped when the sixties generation held full sway during the early 1970s, and how high it may have peaked had we been able to ask the question during the great religious revivals and "awakenings" that historians tell us swept the country in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries.

Currently, those most likely to say religion plays an important part in their lives include women, those who are 50 or older, non-whites, Southerners and Protestants. In line with these characteristics, they also are usually less well educated and have lower-than-average incomes.

Majority Expect Revival of Religious Faith

New York, N.Y. — A majority of adults (54%) interviewed by The Harris Poll in December 1989 expect to see a revival of religious faith in their lifetime. Disagreeing are 38% of the adults interviewed on the survey, and 8 percent held no opinion.

By contrast in December 1976, only 38% of the U.S. adult population expected a religious revival would take place.

The 1989 survey was conducted by telephone between December 6th and 10th, among a national cross section of 1,251 adults.

Importance of Religion

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important
1989	55%	30%	14%
1988	54	31	14
1987	53	32	14
1986	55	30	14
1985	55	31	13
1984	56	30	13
1983	56	30	13
1982	56	30	13
1981	56	29	14
1980	55	31	13
1978	52	32	14
1965	70	22	7
1952	75	20	5

"No opinion" (1 to 2 percent, annually) omitted.

Balance of Power Shifting on Issue of Abortion

Abortion undoubtedly has been the leading secular issue confronting America's religious bodies in the 1980s. Both pro-choice and anti-abortion activists often hold deep religious convictions, and debate on the issue has been heated for most denominations.

While anti-abortion forces generally have been the most active element in the debates, demonstrations and legislative lobbying on the issue, the American public as a whole still opposes overturning the Roe v. Wade decision of the Supreme Court, by a margin of 61% to 33% who favor reversal of the decision. About one person in 20 (6%) is still undecided on the issue.

Anti-abortionists were initially encouraged by the Webster case that has cleared the way for states to pass legislation restricting abortion, but the early impact, as measured by the polls and this past November's election results, has been an awakening of the pro-choice forces. An October 1989 Gallup Poll still finds that right-to-life forces are the most active but results indicate that the balance may be shifting rapidly.

First, those favoring overturning Roe v. Wade are the most likely to report that their feelings on the issue are extremely strong or very strong compared to how they feel on other issues. The proportion among pro-life adherents who hold strong feelings has grown from 70% in 1979 to 74% in 1989. Only one person in four who opposed overturning Roe v. Wade held strong feelings on the matter (25%) in 1979, but by 1989 the proportion nearly doubled to 43%.

Secondly, it is easy to see why some politicians consider members of the right-to-life movement to be "single issue" voters, because 72% of those favoring overturning Roe v. Wade consider a candidate's position on the matter to be the singly most important issue. Among pro-choice forces, only 1% named the issue as being most important in 1979, but in 1989, 8% said the matter is the most important issue in choosing a candidate.

Thirdly, the number of right-to-life proponents who have written letters or contributed money to the cause rose from 20% in 1979 to 27% in 1989. At the same time, similar activities from pro-choice proponents showed a greater proportional increase from 7% in 1979 to 15% in 1989.

Catholics are somewhat more likely than Protestants to seek the overturning of Roe v. Wade, and to be actively engaged in the issue. Catholics, however, are hardly united on the issue even though their Church vigorously opposes abortion in its teachings. Four Catholics in 10 (39%) would like to see Roe v. Wade overturned, but 56% oppose overturning the Supreme Court's ruling, and 5% are undecided. By comparison, 34% of Protestants seek the repeal of Roe v. Wade, while 59% favor its retention.

Four in 10 Catholics and Protestants alike believe the abortion issue is an important issue in testing a candidate's suitability. Protestants (52%) are slightly more likely than Catholics (47%) to say they have strong feelings about the abortion issue. In terms of activity, however, more Catholics (20%) than Protestants (15%) have contributed letters, petition signatures or money to the cause.

The results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,234 adults, 18 and older, conducted in the period of October 5-8, 1989. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Pro-Life v. Pro-Choice Activists

	Favor overturn of Roe v. Wade		Oppose overturn of Roe v. Wade	
	1979	1989	1979	1989
Feelings about abortion issue are . . .				
Extremely strong	36%	41%	7%	17%
Very strong	34	33	18	26
Importance of candidate's position on abortion when deciding how to vote . . .				
Most important	12%	27%	1%	8%
Very important	44	38	17	26
Activism				
Written a letter	8%	8%	2%	4%
Given money	6	11	4	7
Letters and money	6	4	4	4

WORSHIP SERVICE ATTENDANCE IN PAST SEVEN DAYS

	Adults	Teens
1989	43%	57%
1988	42	51
1987	40	52
1986	40	54
1985	42	52
1984	40	52
1983	40	53
1982	41	50
1981	41	54
1980	41	50
1972	40	*
1967	43	
1962	46	
1958	49	
1954	46	
1950	39	
1940	37	
1939	41	

*Teen attendance figures unavailable for earlier years.

Young Adults Conspiculously Absent at Weekly Worship Services

Young adults often are conspiculously absent at worship services in the average week. The pews are more likely to be filled by the very young, their middle-aged parents, and their grandparents.

Teen-agers set a modern attendance record in 1989 when 57% participated in worship services during the average week at a church or synagogue. The previous high mark of attendance was 54% of the teens, reached in both 1986 and 1981.

Overall attendance in 1989 by adults, ages 18 and older, averaged 43% in a typical week. This represents only a one percentage-point increase over 1988, but it marks the first time since 1967 that this level of attendance has been achieved. The record high attendance figure for adults in America is 59%, accomplished in both 1959 and 1955.

Both the total adult and teen attendance figures, however, mask a drop in formal worship practices among older teens and young adults. Attendance is highest among young teens, ages 13 to 15, with 62 percent reporting they went to church or synagogue the previous week

Who Is Active?

	Protestants	Catholics
Roe v. Wade		
Favor overturning	33%	39%
Oppose	59	56
Feelings about abortion issue are . . .		
Extremely strong	24%	21%
Very strong	28	26
Activism . . .		
Written a letter	5%	5%
Given money	7	7
Letters and money	3	8

Editor's Query

There is an on-going debate by the **Emerging Trends** editorial staff on the appropriateness of including surveys on issues such as abortion and other secular issues in the publication. Our concern is whether readers want us to confine reporting to surveys on religious beliefs and practices, or if some secular issues with an important bearing on religious or denominational debates should also be included. Your comments and guidance on this issue are important to us, and should be sent to:

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in 1989. Among those who are 16 to 17 years of age, attendance drops to 50 percent. Lowest attendance by any age group is found among young adults, ages 18 to 29, with only one in three (32%) going to religious services in 1989. Attendance then advances as people mature, with four in 10 (40%) of those who are 30 to 49, and over half (52%) of those who are 50 and older, reporting attendance in an average week.

These findings of course strongly suggest that worship service attendance for children and teens in many instances may be enforced rather than voluntary. Indeed, in the Princeton Religion Research Center's study, **The Unchurched American**, the leading reason given by young unchurched adults for not going to church is that "I started making my own decisions." Similarly, in a 1988 Gallup Organization study of **Teen-age Attitudes and Behavior Concerning Religion**, one teen in three reports attending church only because "my parents wanted me to go" (24%) of "my parents told me to go" (12%).

Geographically, attendance by teens is particularly high in the South where two teens in three (67%) went to worship services in 1989. Attendance also was fairly high in the Midwest (55%), but comparatively fewer teens attended religious services in the East (52%) or West (45%). Adult residents of the South (47%), East (43%), and Midwest (43%) also are more likely to be church goers than are those who live in the West (34%).

Adult women are more likely than men to have attended services in 1989, by a margin of 48% to 38%. A similar disparity in attendance is found among teens, with young women outnumbering young men at places of worship by 61% to 52%. Teen attendance also peaks among nonwhites (62%) and those who come from white-collar households (60%).

The adult church attendance figures are based on 3,251 interviews conducted by The Gallup Organization nationwide throughout 1989 and have a sampling variance of plus or minus 3 percentage points. The findings for teen-agers are based on telephone interviews with a representative national cross section of 1,003 teen-agers, 13 to 17, conducted by The Gallup Youth Survey throughout 1989, and have a sampling variance of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

"Lowest attendance by any age group is found among young adults, ages 18 to 29 . . ."

Religion Facts

Charitable Giving

	Total	Church members	Non-members
In past 12 months . . .			
Contributed food, clothing or other property	74%	78%	66%
Non-church monetary contributions	70	73	64
Church charity monetary contributions	60	77	24
Served as unpaid volunteer worker	42	46	32
Helped:			
Needy relative	54	57	47
Needy friend	53	54	51
Needy neighbor	49	53	42
Another needy person	38	40	33
Homeless, street person	36	37	33
Types who benefitted:			
Poor or homeless	63	64	59
Elderly	62	68	50
Young children	61	62	58
The sick	54	59	43
The Handicapped	50	54	43
Teens, young adults	49	51	45
Victims of crime, abuse or disaster	40	42	37
Areas that benefitted:			
Local community	59	59	60
Local region	15	15	14
Nation	11	10	12
World	12	13	10
Number of respondents	(1230)	(715)	(311)

Source: The Gallup Poll, October 1989

Teen-agers State Their Denominational Preferences

Protestants currently outnumber Catholics among the adult U.S. population by over two to one, with approximately 56% of adults on recent Gallup Polls stating a preference for one of the Protestant denominations and 25% saying they are Catholics.

The ranks of Roman Catholics, however, would appear to be growing faster among the young. In surveys taken by The Gallup Youth Survey in 1989, fewer teens than adults identify themselves as Protestants, while more say they are Catholics. Currently, slightly over half of the teens (52%) cite preference for one of the Protestant denominations, while one in three (32%) is a Catholic by preference.

Very few Catholic teens (18%) are found in the South where 72% of the young people claim allegiance to the Protestant faith. Protestants also outnumber Catholics in the Midwest, by a margin of 49% to 40%. In the East there is a slight plurality of Catholics (42%) over Protestants (40%), but in the West the edge goes to the Protestants, 36% to 33%.

Young Catholics most often are found in large cities (36%) and the suburbs (32%), but in small towns and rural areas are outnumbered by Protestants by two to one (60% to 27%).

In a bygone era Catholics were largely viewed as recent immigrants with trade, labor, or service occupations, but today there are more Catholic teens who come from white-collar households (35%) than are found in blue-collar families (30%). By contrast, the majority of Protestant teens now come from blue-collar family backgrounds (56%) rather than from white-collar households (48%).

The findings are based on telephone interviews with a representative national cross section of 1,003 teen-agers, 13 through 17, conducted throughout 1989. For results based on a sample of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus three percentage points.

"The ranks of Roman Catholics . . . would appear to be growing faster among the young."

Religious Preference of Teens

	Protestant	Catholic
NATIONAL	52%	32%
Sex		
Male	48	33
Female	55	31
Age		
Ages 13 to 15	54	30
Ages 16 to 17	54	30
Race		
Whites	49	33
Non-whites	64	28
Family		
White-collar family background	48	35
Blue-collar family background	56	30
Region		
East	40	42
Midwest	49	40
South	72	18
West	36	33
Urbanization		
Central cities	49	36
Suburbs	49	32
Non-metropolitan areas	60	27

ANNOUNCING...THE GEORGE H. GALLUP INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE'S

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The cost per copy for the 500-page report is $250, and worth many times its price. Please make checks payable to The George H. Gallup International Institute. Mail to 100 Palmer Square, P.O. Box 140, Princeton, New Jersey 08542.

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